

ASK A REL RESPONSE

Class Size

A frequent question that comes to the Ask A REL reference desk is: “What is the optimum class size?” Although the research does not offer definitive guidelines on this topic, many studies have provided general conclusions about how class size affects student performance.

This Ask A REL response offers a sampling of the publicly accessible resources on this topic. The abstracts have been adapted from published material.

Customized searches are provided through our Ask A REL program, which is a free service. Ask A REL responses are tailored to meet the needs of each individual request and typically include copies of full-text articles from peer-reviewed journals. If you would like additional research on class size or other education-related topics, please contact Jennifer Klump at relnw@educationnorthwest.org for personalized assistance.

Achilles C. M. (2012). *Class-size policy: The STAR experiment and related class size studies* (NCPEA Policy brief: Vol. 1, No. 2). Retrieved from ERIC database:
<http://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED540485>

This policy brief summarizes findings on class size from more than 25 years of work on the Tennessee Student Teacher Achievement Ratio (STAR) randomized, longitudinal experiment, and other class-size reduction studies. The STAR research showed that small classes (15–17 pupils) in K–3 classrooms provided short- and long-term benefits. Although all students benefited; poor, minority, and male students reaped extra benefits in terms of improved test outcomes, school engagement, and reduced grade retention and dropout rates. Differing formulas for counting students and teachers are a major impediment to understanding and using small classes correctly: a pupil-teacher ratio is not the same as class size.

Chingos, M. M., & Whitehurst, G. J. (2011). *Class size: What research says and what it means for state policy.* Retrieved from Brookings Institution website:
<http://www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2011/05/11-class-size-whitehurst-chingos>

This informal review summarizes the research and ends with this concluding statement: “State resources for education should always be judiciously allocated, but the need to carefully weigh costs and benefits is particularly salient in times of austere budgets. Class-size reduction has

This Ask A REL response was developed by REL Northwest under Contract ED-IES-12-C-0003 from the U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences. The content does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of IES or the U.S. Department of Education, nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government.

been shown to work for some students in some grades in some states and countries, but its impact has been found to be mixed or not discernable in other settings and circumstances that seem similar. It is very expensive. The costs and benefits of class-size mandates need to be carefully weighed against all of the alternatives when difficult budget and program decisions must be made.”

**Schanzenbach, D. W. (2014). *Does class size matter?* Retrieved from University of Colorado Boulder, National Education Policy Center website:
<http://nepc.colorado.edu/publication/does-class-size-matter>**

This policy brief summarizes the academic literature on the impact of class size. It finds that class size is an important determinant of a variety of student outcomes, from test scores to broader life outcomes. Smaller classes are particularly effective at raising achievement levels of low-income and minority children. Policymakers should carefully weigh the efficacy of class-size policy against other potential uses of funds. While lower class size has a demonstrable cost, it may prove to be the more cost-effective policy overall.